

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Moonlite Theatre

other names/site number Moonlite Drive-in, 095-5256

2. Location

street & number 17555 Lee Highway not for publication n/a

city or town Abingdon vicinity X

state Virginia county Washington code 191 zip code 24210

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this x nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property x meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide x locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official
Virginia Department of Historic Resources
State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

Date

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
See continuation sheet.
determined eligible for the National Register
See continuation sheet.
determined not eligible for the National Register
removed from the National Register
other (explain):

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

=====

**5. Classification**

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**Ownership of Property** (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property** (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>  3  </u>	<u>  0  </u>	buildings
<u>  1  </u>	<u>  0  </u>	sites
<u>  2  </u>	<u>  0  </u>	structures
<u>  0  </u>	<u>  0  </u>	objects
<u>  6  </u>	<u>  0  </u>	Total

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**   n/a  

**Name of related multiple property listing** (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)   n/a  

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**6. Function or Use**

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**Historic Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:   Recreation and Culture   Sub:   theatre  

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:   Recreation and Culture   Sub:   theatre  

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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**7. Description**

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**Architectural Classification** (Enter categories from instructions)

  Other: drive-in theatre  

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials** (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation   concrete  

roof   metal  

walls   metal  

other   permastone  

**Narrative Description** (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**8. Statement of Significance**

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**Applicable National Register Criteria** (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations** (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment/ Recreation  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance** 1949-1957

**Significant Dates** 1949

**Significant Person** (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) n/a

**Cultural Affiliation** n/a

**Architect/Builder** unknown

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS)**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources

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**10. Geographical Data**  
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**Acreage of Property** 13.29 acres

**UTM References** (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing				
1	17	406111	4059636	2	17	406256	4059707	3	17	406431	4059354	4	17	406352	4059301

\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

=====  
**11. Form Prepared By**  
=====

name/title Michael J. Pulice, Architectural Historian  
 organization Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Roanoke Regional Office date April, 2007  
 street & number 1030 Penmar Ave. SE telephone 540-857-7586  
 city or town Roanoke state VA zip code 24013

=====  
**Additional Documentation**  
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Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps** A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.  
 A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs** Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

=====  
**Property Owner**  
=====

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name William O. Booker  
 street & number P.O. Box 1175 telephone 276-628-3036  
 city or town Abingdon state VA zip code 24210

=====  
**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.). A federal agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number.

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 36 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of



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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
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Moonlite Drive-in Theatre  
Washington County, Virginia

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## 7. Description

### Summary

The Moonlite Theatre is a drive-in theatre located along a major thoroughfare, just west of the small town of Abingdon, in Washington County, Virginia. The theatre was constructed in the spring of 1949 and opened early that summer. The site consists of 13.29 acres on two tax parcels encompassing a number of highly intact resources dating to the period of significance, all in excellent condition. They include the 65-foot-tall screen tower and office wing, the ticket booth, the concession stand/projector booth building, and the neon-illuminated attraction board at the edge of the highway. Although the office wing is attached to the screen tower's masonry base structure, the steel-frame tower was constructed separately, and is considered a separate structure for the purposes of this nomination. All of these features are identified as contributing resources in this nomination. Because the layout of drive-in theatres evolved in the early years of the medium and the Moonlite is a highly representative example from the heyday of drive-ins, the property itself is also identified as a contributing site. Other notable historic features include the reverse-incline parking spots with pole speakers, radiating out in a semi-circle around the screen, and the long entrance/exit drive. Because of its continued use and careful maintenance, the theatre looks and operates today much the same as it did when it opened.

### Detailed Description

The theatre is located southwest of Abingdon on U.S. Highway 11 (Lee Highway), the major transportation route through the area before Interstate 81 was completed in the 1970s. It is situated in a sparsely developed, largely residential area, about 1/2 mi. south of the intersection of Highway 11 and County Road 611, on the north side of Highway 11. The property is elongated and trapezoidal-shaped, measuring roughly 1360 feet along the east and west boundaries by 544 feet along the north terminus and 355 feet along the south terminus, at Highway 11. The property is screened off from the surrounding land parcels by mature trees around the perimeter. The screen tower and ticket booth are set back five hundred feet from the road, with the original neon attraction board greeting patrons at the highway entrance. The total length of the entrance drive, from the highway to the ticket booth is 630 feet. Long entrance drives, where open space and land values allowed, became a common feature of drive-in theatres early in their evolution as a form of entertainment. If the theatre could not accommodate a large number of vehicles waiting to pay for tickets, the lines would spill out onto the highway, creating a hazard. The audience parking spaces are located on the north side of the screen, extending to the north end of the site. Centrally placed among the many parking/viewing spaces is a one-story building housing the concession stand, projector booth, and bathrooms.

The chief focal point of the Moonlite Theatre is the back (south) side of the screen tower, facing the highway. It doubles as a highway billboard, easily seen from Highway 11 and Interstate 81, with large neon letters spelling **MOONLITE** in red and **THEATRE** in blue, amidst 10 illuminated white stars and surmounted by a yellow moon in the upper left-hand corner. The lettering and color scheme is original. Behind the lettering is corrugated sheet metal, painted silver, which covers the entire screen tower structure. An inconspicuous one-story, six-room wing of offices was built onto the base of the screen

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tower's rear elevation about 1950. It was converted to an apartment when business began to wane somewhat in the 1970s.

Another important feature of the Moonlite and indeed most drive-in theatres is the two-sided attraction board at the front entrance. It is the drive-in equivalent of the conventional theatre's marquee. A freestanding structure with a V-shaped footprint and bright white, fluorescent-lit reader boards on two sides, it captures the attention of both northbound and southbound travelers on Highway 11 and Interstate 81. The reader boards use removable letters to advertise movie titles and show times. Along the top, above the reader boards on each side, are large, orange neon letters spelling **MOONLITE THEATRE**. At the end of the structure facing the road are 4 sets of paired, curved neon tubes alternating blue and red in color. The attraction board structure has a small room within it, entered at the north end, for servicing the electrical circuitry and neon. Neon lighting is notorious for requiring frequent service and maintenance, yet the Moonlite's attraction board remains in good working order and in original condition. The movie screen, on the north elevation of the tower, is 80 feet wide.

The ticket booth is a tiny, one-room frame building connected to the east side of the screen tower by a metal covering that extends beyond the ticket booth to the east, providing covered drive-throughs for cars on each side of the ticket booth. The ticket booth has a large, single-pane, fixed window on the front (south) elevation, and operable windows on both sides. The wall surface around the windows is treated with artificial stone facing, which dates to the period of significance.

The building housing the concession stand, projection booth at the south end of the building (approximately 215 feet from the screen), and bathrooms, is a one-story, flat-roofed structure. It is centrally located among the parking spaces, its footprint measuring approximately 35 feet by 60 feet. The structural walls appear to be concrete block. The block is exposed but painted red around the projection booth area on the south elevation. The remaining exterior of the building is covered with vertical aluminum siding that may be original. Below the siding is a corrugated aluminum apron covering the foundation. There are two entrance doors on the west elevation. The interior of the building has spacious, well-lit vending and waiting areas with a snack counter spanning the length of the building.

The 454 parking/viewing spaces were designed as reverse-incline ramps, so the car windshields are aimed slightly upward for easier viewing of the tall movie screen. Unlike the earliest drive-in theatres, the Moonlite's spaces allow the driver to pull forward through the space after the movie, instead of backing out, creating traffic flow problems. The outermost spaces are as far as 570 feet from the screen. The pole speakers still survive, but the system is in poor repair. For the time being, the audio portion of feature movies is broadcast over FM radio. The parking spaces and driveways to the spaces remain unpaved.

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**Moonlite Drive-in Theatre  
Washington County, Virginia**

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Inventory Summary

1. Screen tower, 1949. Contributing structure.
2. Offices, ca. 1950. Contributing building.
3. Ticket booth, 1949. Contributing building.
4. Concessions/projection building. 1949. Contributing building.
5. Attraction board, 1949. Contributing structure.
6. Theatre property, developed 1949. Contributing site.

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Summary Statement and Justification of Criteria**

The Moonlite Theatre is significant under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment and Recreation. Once a common feature on landscapes across the United States, the drive-in theatre has been for decades a resource type of increasing rarity. Nevertheless, drive-ins have been generally overlooked as places of historic significance, having once occupied an important place in American popular culture. Few have been designated with National Register status. The Moonlite is an exceptional example, possessing outstanding historic integrity. Originally owned and operated by local businessman T. D. Fields, it is one of only eight drive-in theatres currently operating in Virginia.<sup>1</sup> It is among the earliest survivals, constructed just sixteen years after the first drive-in was introduced in New Jersey. The Moonlite opened early in the summer of 1949, and has operated continuously since. It is famous among drive-ins, as the subject of at least two country-western songs, which, in keeping with tradition are played before each show, the audience often chiming in. The best-known song, from the 1970s, is entitled "Moonlite Drive-in."<sup>2</sup> In the Abingdon-Bristol area of southwestern Virginia, the Moonlite is a venerated landmark, still providing reliable entertainment and a place for social interaction to thousands of families for generations. It is for these reasons that the period of significance starts at construction, 1949, and ends at the fifty-year cut-off, 1957.

**Acknowledgements**

Mary Beth Rainero of Bristol, Virginia, brought the theatre to the attention of the author. Marc Wagner of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) and Shannon Davis of the National Park Service generously shared their knowledge and sources about drive-ins and roadside architecture. Jean McRae, Kelly Spradley-Kurowski, and Quatro Hubbard of DHR also provided valuable assistance throughout the processes of surveying, evaluating, reviewing and archiving documents and materials.

**Historical Background**

The drive-in concept was invented and patented by Richard Hollingshead, Jr. in 1933. A lover of both movies and cars, he opened the first one that year in Camden, New Jersey. It took a several years for the

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idea to be improved, catch on, and spread to other parts of the country. There were only 102 drive-in theatres in existence in 1946, but drive-in theatres soon became part of a boom in drive-in businesses during the post-World War II era, spurred by the new affordability and vast popularity of the automobile during the era of widespread middle-class prosperity. Drive-in restaurants became equally as popular. In 1949, there were 820 drive-in theatres nation wide.<sup>3</sup> The Moonlite Theatre opened in June or July of 1949 and quickly became a highly successful operation under the ownership of T. D. Fields.<sup>4</sup> Large baby-boom families were particularly good customers. They took advantage of the low admission prices and reasonably priced hotdogs, sodas and other concessions, while avoiding the need to hire baby sitters. During the 1950s and 60s, the Moonlite became a local institution and a mainstay of weekend evening entertainment and recreation. The Moonlite's proximity to the City of Bristol, the "birthplace of country music," led to reminiscences about the theatre in the lyrics of two well-known country songs.

Like other drive-in theatres across the country, however, the Moonlite's business began to wane somewhat in the 1960s and 70s, after peaking in the late 1950s. The loss of business is often attributed to the rise in the American family's television ownership during the period, but numerous factors were undoubtedly responsible, such as smaller families, smaller cars, sharp rises in land value, and the permanent implementation of daylight savings time in 1967. In 1964, Fields sold the theatre to a Mr. Mays, who continued operation through the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Further hardships were brought on by the introduction of "big-box," "multi-plex" theatres in the 1980s. Seekers of nostalgia kept a few theatres open over the years with their patronage, however, and the Moonlite remained in operation in spite of small profits. The number of drive-ins nation wide dropped from a high of 4,063 in 1958, to about 500 in 1999.<sup>5</sup> The Moonlite theatre's current owner, William Booker, purchased it in 1992. Since the early 1990s, the theatre has seen a resurgence of popularity and its business has flourished under the current ownership, in spite of stiff competition from a nearby big-box theatre and the home electronics industry. The theatre opens each year in early April and remains an immensely popular attraction, drawing much of its patronage from the nearby towns of Bristol and Abingdon.<sup>6</sup>

### Endnotes

1. [www.drive-ins.com](http://www.drive-ins.com).
2. Craig Wilson, "Nights by the Light of the Silvery Screen," *USA Today*, 1999.
3. Liebs, 157-159.
4. William Booker, personal communication, November 2005.
5. Nat'l Ass'n of Theatre Owners, cited in *USA Today* article "Nights by the Light of the Silvery Screen," 1999.
6. William Booker, personal communication, April, 2007.

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**9. Bibliographical References**

Bedeau, Bert and Tricia Canaday, "Spud Drive-in Theatre, Teton County, Idaho" *NRHP nomination*. Boise, 2003.

Bell, Shannon, (now Shannon Davis) "From Ticket Booth to Screen Tower: An Architectural Study of Drive-in Theatres in the Baltimore–Washington D.C.–Richmond Corridor." In *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IX*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_. "From Ticket Booth to Screen Tower..." M.A. Thesis, George Washington University, 1999.

Booker, William O. Personal Communication with author, 2005-2007.

Jennings, Jan, ed. *Roadside America: The Automobile in Culture and Design*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1990.

Liebs, Chester H. *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985.

Sheals, Debbie, "66 Drive-in, Carthage, Missouri" *NRHP nomination*. Columbia, MO, 2002.

Wilson, Craig, "Nights by the Light of the Silvery Screen," *USA Today* article, 1999.

**10. Geographical References**

**Verbal Boundary Description**

The nominated parcel boundary encompasses the entire theatre property of 13.29 acres as shown on accompanying annotated aerial view and tax parcel map; and listed as parcels 123-9-A and 123-9-B in the Washington County tax data.

**Boundary Justification**

The nominated parcel boundary includes the entire theatre property as laid out when the theatre was established in 1949, and as it existed during the period of significance and up to the present.

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Washington County, Virginia**

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**Photographs**

Moonlite (drive-in) Theatre  
DHR #095-5256  
Washington County, Virginia  
Photographer: Michael J. Pulice  
Date: September, 2006

1. Theatre and attraction board as seen from U.S. Highway 11, facing northeast.
2. Screen tower, office wing, and ticket booth, facing northeast.
3. Attraction Board, facing east along Highway 11.
4. Concessions/projection/bathroom building, facing northeast.
5. Movie screen, facing east.
6. Ticket booth, facing northwest.